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Outdoors Story Published On 6/23/2004

The last untouched wild frontier

By David Watson
Boomerang Outdoors Writer

The American West has its share of diverse scenic beauty from the volcanic Cascades of the northwest, the rugged mountain ranges of Montana and the cactus-laden hills of Arizona.

Wyoming is mostly considered the last great pristine wilderness in the lower 48 states of the country because of a low population growth, with wildernesses such as the Bighorns Mountains that rise from the Great Plains, Yellowstone National Park along with the Beartooth and Teton mountain ranges that surround it and the mighty Wind River Range that create a natural boundary between northern and southern Wyoming.

But with all the immense country Wyoming has to offer, the one area that is probably the last untouched wilderness is the Red Desert — and specifically Adobe Town.

The boundaries of the Red Desert extend from the Continental Divide that cuts into the Ferris Mountains and the southern part of South Pass to the north, Rawlins and the Atlantic Rim to the east, the Rock Springs uplift to the west and just beyond the Powder Rim across the Colorado border to the bluffs of the Little Snake River flood plain to the south.

The Red Desert encompasses about six million acres, which spans about 100 miles from east to west and 60 miles north and south.

The lookout on top of Skull Creek Rim “is probably the biggest track of pristine country left in the Red Desert and it happens to be the most spectacular,” said Erik Molvar, wildlife biologist for Biodiversity Conservation Alliance of Laramie (BCA).

The Skull Creek Rim features a cliff wall with a drop of about 1,000 feet to the valley below, which rises again near the juniper and sage covered hills of the Powder Rim.

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“Skull Creek Rim is a wash area that is considered eligible for the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act even though it only carries water during flash floods, according to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM),” said Molvar.

Molvar’s duties for the BCA include supervising wilderness inventories of BLM lands, drafting long-term conservation alternatives for large-scale land management plans for public lands, reviewing articles and providing technical reports on various topics and submitting comments on federal projects that affect wildlife in wild places and a wildland guide for both the public and media.

The unique habitat of the Red Desert is just about as diverse as the lands itself with one of the largest herds of pronghorn antelope at 15,000 head, 1,000 head of wild horses, golden eagles, ferruginous hawks, burrowing owls, sage grouse and sage thrashers.

“There is a rich diversity of desert wildlife and the Red Desert really represents the last stronghold for these critters,” Molvar said. “In most of their native ranges in other areas of the west, the cycle of overgrazing, cheatgrass invasion and frequent wildfires have wiped out a lot of sage brush country. So animals like the sage grouse and sage thrasher have been wiped out. But even though this is one of the areas that is considered a stronghold and they seem to be abundant, there is still a decline with only 60-70 nesting pairs of thrashers in the whole Red Desert — so it is relative.”

Also unique to the Red Desert is the soil compositions of mudstone, shale and different types of sandstone that are rich in bentonite from the geological Wasatch formation. The soils have a high clay content and a high water-holding capacity.

“There are also vast sagebrush steps where the soil is more saline or salty with bright green Greasewood shrubs and the lower growing Gardner Salt Brush,” Molvar said. “Then on the stabilized sand dunes with more well drained areas is the sagebrush grassland. On the rims, there are some cushion plant communities with small wildflowers that are adapted to the wind and ice scouring that happens in the winter.”

With all the majestic formations, Adobe Town is considered as the crown jewel of the Red Desert.

The natural boundaries of the Adobe Town, named by early explorers because of its resemblance to the adobe ruins of the southwest.

“The most unique aspect of the Adobe Town is the towering cliffs and eroding pinnacles, which are world-class badlands in a pristine state,” Molvar said. “They are the same as they would have been in the 1860s when the first explorers came into this area. It is rare to find an area in the Red Desert that is so pristine and spectacular, and for this reason, we want this area to stay the way it is for people to enjoy in the future.”

The efforts of Molvar and the BCA are to study the potential of the area to be considered as a wildlife preservation area.

“The citizen’s proposed wilderness for Adobe Town is about 190,000 acres, and of that, the BLM has already granted an interim protection for about 85,000 acres as a wilderness study area. We are trying to get the BLM to expand the study area when they revise the Great Divide Resource Management Plan,”

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Molvar said. "At the same time, the BLM is proposing a 385 well gas project (Desolation Flats Project), which would eat up about 50,000 acres of the proposed expansion. In the Red Desert there is about three-quarters of a million acres that are potential wilderness areas, which is about 15 percent of the land area of the Red Desert."

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